into one and many

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at https://archiveofourown.org/works/80395966.

Rating:
Teen And Up Audiences

Archive Warning:
Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Category:
Gen

Fandom:
Batman - All Media Types

Relationships:
Tim Drake & Jason Todd, Jason Todd & Bruce Wayne

Characters:
Jason Todd, Tim Drake (DCU), Bruce Wayne, Alfred Pennyworth

Additional Tags:
Batkids Age Reversal | Reverse Robins (DCU), Jason Todd-centric, Discussions of Death, Past Child Abuse, Implied/Referenced Child Abuse, Implied/Referenced Character Death, mentions of drug use, Complicated Relationships, Complicated Feelings, Comic Arc: "A Death in the Family" in Batman (1940) #426-429, Canon-Typical Violence, Other Additional Tags to Be Added

Language:
English

Series:
Part 3 of the bird bestiary

Stats:
Published: 2026-02-28 Words: 12,730 Chapters: 1/3

into one and many

by deitybird

Summary

Jason is lost.

(In which Jason Todd's familial relationship fractures, and he tries to find a place for himself.)

Notes

Credit to Batman #424 and #426

Hi, guys! Here's another birthday gift from me!! I've been planning this for a while but finally got the chance to write for it!!! A portion of the dialogue comes straight from those issues I credited... because yes, I'm following a storyline! :)

There are discussions of Child Abuse in this chapter. Jason has a lot of feelings regarding it, and I want to say that some of his feelings are projected from my own experiences. That's where the complicated relationships/feelings come in, because someone can hurt you, and you can still love them. Likewise, you can love someone, and you can still hate them. I don't know. That's how I feel about it. You don't have to agree, and you can feel differently, but this Jason does feel the way I do. So, yeah.

If you believe I need additional tags, PLEASE let me know. Thank you! Posting this from Disneyland lol

Title is taken from "A Dove" by Ted Hughes

Snap its twig-tether — mounts —
Dream-yanked into vacuum
Wings snickering.

Another, in a shatter, hurls dodging away up.

They career through tree-mazes —
Nearly uncontrollable love-weights.

Or now
Temple-dancers, possessed, and steered

By solemn powers
Through insane, stately convulsions.

Porpoises
of dove-lust and blood splendour
With arcs
And plungings, and spray-slow explosions.

Now violently gone
Riding the snake of the long love-whip
Among flarings of mares and stallions

Now staying
Coiled on a bough
Bubbling molten, wobbling top-heavy
Into one and many.

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1

It's raining.

Even with the water-resistant cape wrapped around his body, Jason Todd still feels the chill of those droplets. He curls in on himself, pressing against the building in an attempt to find additional warmth, and hopes his favorite gargoyle hides him from Batman.

Another shiver passes through him, and Jason sniffs, sliding up the white lenses of his domino mask to dab at his eyes with the inside of his cape. Rain gets inside his mask, but Jason doesn't care.

It's not like it matters, right? Jason thinks, feeling glum. *I won't be in this suit for much longer.*

A flash of anger follows the thought, and Jason nearly lets it overtake him. Then, he remembers the accusation in Bruce's voice, and the feeling dissipates as quickly as it appeared. His vision blurs—not from the rain, but from the fresh wave of tears spilling out of his eyes. Jason drops his cape to press his gloved hands against them, pretending his shaky exhale doesn't sound like a sob.

"I thought I'd find you here."

For a brief moment, Jason fears that Batman (or worse, Nightwing) caught up to him. His mind registers the voice a moment later, and he relaxes. Jason lifts his head to see Shrike, also known as Tim Drake, perched on the other side of the gargoyle, holding an umbrella above their heads. It blocks the worst of the rain, but Jason can still hear it hitting the building, feel it graze the edge of his cape.

"You were looking for me?" Jason asks, wincing when he hears the scratchiness of his voice.

"Everyone's looking for you, Dove."

"Don't call me that," Jason snaps, feeling a flicker of guilt when Tim merely dips his head. For a brief moment, Jason wishes Damian were there, only because he knows Damian will react to his anger with more anger. "I'm not—I don't—"

"Hey, it's okay," Tim says, much softer now. He raises his free hand to touch something on the side of his face, and Jason sees the whites of

his domino disappear, revealing his green eyes. They look less bright tonight. More teal, he thinks. “How about we go back to my place?” A pause. “No one will find you there, I swear. It’s my newest one.”

Jason sniffs and swipes the back of his hand across his face. “Okay,” he eventually says, pushing himself up. He shakes out his hands, ridding them of rain droplets, and carefully edges closer to Tim, pulling his grapnel launcher out of his belt. “Is it better than the last one?”

Tim huffs, but Jason can see a hint of his smile before the man fully turns away. “That’s enough out of you,” he says, somehow collapsing his umbrella into a small bundle and tucking it somewhere behind his cape. “I’ll let you issue your judgment when you see it.”

He fires his line and swings to the next building, and although the rain makes it harder to see him, Jason can make out the distinct colors of his suit if he stares long enough. Jason is about to follow when he stops to pat the gargoyle a few times.

“Thank you,” he says to the statue, “for always being there.” And with that sentiment out there, Jason fires his launcher and follows Tim out into the rain.

★★

They arrive at a rather dilapidated building on the outskirts of Crime Alley, but unlike the last one, it seems more populated, and less likely to crumble during the next Rogue attack.

Tim tells him to wait at the rooftop of the closest building, passing him the umbrella, so Jason dutifully tucks himself beneath it. He watches as Tim slips through the window past the alley, away from any cameras or snooping people, most likely. Jason is ready to feel annoyed when nothing else happens for the next few minutes until finally, Tim pokes his head out and beckons Jason over.

“Sorry, I had to disable my traps first,” Tim explains, shutting the window behind him. He takes the umbrella from Jason and dumps it in a cardboard box nearby, gesturing to an open door down the hall. “I should have a change of clothes in the room. Feel free to hang up your suit to dry, too.”

“This place *does* look better than the last one,” Jason comments, tipping his head back to see a large brown stain in the ceiling. He doesn’t know if it’s water or blood, and he decides not to ask. “Well, by a little…” He glances at Tim, concerned, and asks, “This one isn’t going to be permanent, right?”

Tim snorts. “No,” he replies, moving past Jason while removing his cape. He tosses it over a door and disappears around a corner. “Do you like tea?”

“Um…” Jason hasn’t had much, but he did like the blend Damian let him try not too long ago. “Sure?”

“Good. Go do what I said, and then we can talk about why you decided to run off on everyone.”

Jason’s stomach turns, but he surprisingly doesn’t feel as anxious as he should about his impending doom. He hurries to the other room, feeling water drip off him with every step, and grimaces when he sees an air mattress on the floor. Jason looks around the sad state of Tim’s bedroom, cracked walls and all, spying a duffel bag leaning haphazardly against a closet door. He digs through it, picks out a faded Superman shirt and a pair of olive green sweatpants, and works on removing his damp suit.

He ends up needing to roll up the pants since they’re too long on him, which is fine. Jason’s not about to complain about borrowed clothes.

When he steps out of the bedroom, Jason can smell the tea brewing. It’s earthy, but not terribly so, and maybe a little woodsy, too. There’s also a hint of sweetness, similar to honey, and overall, it’s strangely familiar.

“Your hair’s still damp,” Tim comments when Jason approaches a rickety-looking table with plastic chairs around it, setting a mug down in front of him. He’s still partially dressed in his suit. “I have a blow dryer… somewhere. Kon left it with me the last time he visited.”

“Kon?” Jason stares at him, eyes wide. “Do you mean Superboy?”

Tim shrugs. “Sure,” he replies, sitting on one of the chairs. Jason follows his example, carefully cupping the mug of tea. The initial warmth stings, but it works to chase away some of the lingering chill. “He’s still thinking about changing his name.” Tim gestures to the mug. “Drink,” he says. “It’s ashwagandha.”

“Oh!” Now Jason recognizes the smell. “That’s what Damian buys all the time. I never see him drink it, so I guess he keeps it around for you.” He brings the cup up to his mouth, gently blowing on the liquid. “Dickie and I like to go through his groceries.”

“As you should,” Tim says with a nod. He lifts the mug to his lips and has an audible sip. Jason can see a Wonder Woman symbol etched proudly on the side.

“You really won’t tell anyone that I’m here?” Jason asks, tapping a finger against the handle of his mug. When Tim pointedly glances at it, Jason finally has a taste. The warmth slides down his throat and settles in his chest, and he can’t help but exhale in relief.

“Nope,” Tim says, tucking some hair behind his ear. This close, Jason can see that it’s getting pretty long. He’s surprised Damian hasn’t tried to cut it for him since he always gets so anal about everyone’s hair. “I’ll tell them that I found you when they call, and that’s it.”

“Do you think they’ll find me?” Jason asks worriedly, turning his cup. It scrapes against the table, but it already looks crappy enough, so Jason thinks Tim probably doesn’t care about another scratch. “I don’t think I’m ready to see anyone else.”

“Well, I disabled your tracker before we got here. Mine, too.”

“Okay,” Jason says, and adds in a much smaller voice, “Thank you, Tim.”

Tim smiles at him. Normally, he looks like a starving Victorian child, what with his pale complexion and the bags under his eyes, but his gentle expression makes him seem younger—less haunted by horrors Jason can only imagine. “You’re welcome, Jason,” he says, very softly.

Jason glances around the apartment, mostly looking for a distraction to avoid the upcoming conversation. “When are you going to move to an actual place?” he asks, taking another sip of his tea. The flavor isn’t unpleasant, but there’s an undertone of bitterness that the honey can’t quite cover up. “Alfie will probably be worried about you breathing in mold and stuff.”

“Alfred worries about everyone over the smallest things,” Tim replies, waving a hand. “But, yes. I’m in the process of building my own space.”

Jason blinks. “Building?” he repeats incredulously.

“You expect me to be a vigilante without a headquarters?”

“True,” Jason concedes, tapping a fingernail against the ceramic. “So, you’re going to have your own Batcave?” He pauses, mulling it over some more. “Or maybe a bird nest would be better, considering…”

“A nest isn’t too bad,” Tim says thoughtfully. He smiles at Jason again. “Thanks for the idea.”

“Sure!” Jason peers at him curiously. “How come you’re finally getting a bigger place? Did I finally get through to you?”

The corner of Tim’s mouth twitches. “Because Young Justice is making a comeback,” he answers, his expression shifting to something more sheepish. “Back in *those* days, my friends and I came up with the idea of living together. Now that I’m back, we finally decided to make it happen.” He leans closer. “You want to tell me what’s going on? And also get into why you weren’t with Batman or Nightwing?”

Jason fiddles with his mug some more, feeling nervous. He gulps some tea, opens and closes his mouth several times, and finally, Jason sighs, slumping in his chair as he recalls everything that led him to this point.

“Well,” he begins. “It started during patrol when I heard a woman scream…”

★★

After his tale, Jason stares down at the dregs of his tea. He still feels miserable about the whole situation, but now there’s a weight off his shoulders after having someone sit there and *listen* to him without making any assumptions about what happened.

“Do you think Bruce will give me up?” Jason still can’t help but ask, and although he tries to keep his tone neutral, the way Tim knows how to do so well in any situation, he can make out the smallest tremor in his voice. “Is he still going to want me? He thinks I broke his rule. What if he—”

He hears Tim say, “Oh, Jason,” before arms wrap around him. Jason is then pulled into a warm embrace, and Jason can’t help but melt into

it, clinging to the man in return. “Bruce would *never* give you up, alright? He *loves* you, Jason, and you’ll always be his son. That’ll never change, no matter what happens.”

Embarrassingly enough, Jason feels his eyes sting with the threat of tears. “How can you be so sure?”

“He still loves Damian, right?”

“That’s different…”

“Why?” Tim pulls back, giving him a slightly stern look that makes him wilt. It reminds him too much of Alfred. “Because Damian is his blood? You know that makes no difference to Bruce. Hell, when I first became Bruce’s partner, it was after months of *nothing* between him and Damian.” His eyes go a bit distant, brow furrowed. “He was angry with Damian, sure, but I could tell he still missed him—still loved him, even though Damian broke his most absolute rule.” A pause. “And you know what? Bruce doesn’t hold what I did against me, either.”

Jason frowns. “Huh?” he says, confused. “What’d you do?”

Tim merely smiles—the mysterious one he often wears whenever he has a secret. Jason’s glad he can recognize it now. “What I’m trying to say is that you’re not going anywhere,” he replies instead. “Bruce would never give you up, Jason. I’m sure.”

“Okay,” Jason says quietly. “Thanks.”

There’s a brief pause where Tim refills their mugs, and he even pulls out a tin of butter cookies. When Jason gladly helps himself to one, he realizes it’s Alfred’s recipe and that he’s starving, which is how he ends up devouring about half the supply.

“I do have a question for you,” Jason says afterward, wiping the crumbs off his mouth with the back of his hand. He waits for Tim to lean in, as he always does with Dickie whenever the younger kid has some grand story to tell, and continues, “Don’t you ever want Batman to do something about these types of people? Like, permanently, I mean.”

“Yes,” Tim answers. “Of course.”

“Why doesn’t he, then?” Jason doesn’t even bother to try to hide his frustration. It’s an ongoing issue, and no matter how many times he

asks Bruce or Damian, he always gets the same infuriating answer. “Some of those people out there, what they do—” He thinks of Gloria Stanson, of the terror etched into her still face. “They don’t deserve to live, Tim.”

“But who are we to decide it?” Tim counters before releasing a heavy sigh. “Listen, Jason,” he says, looking solemn. “I know Batman. I’ve known him and his methods since I was old enough to think, moreso when I joined his mission.” He folds his hands together and leans closer. Somehow, the action makes him look smaller—like Gloria, like Jason’s mother. “Killing might get rid of the problem, but Gotham will only lose Batman in the process.”

“What do you mean?” Jason asks, curious.

Tim shakes his head, looking away. “It would be easy for him to do it,” he continues in a much quieter voice. “And that’s why he holds himself back. If Bruce takes one life, he’ll start killing everyone else, and Gotham will live in fear.”

“Is that such a bad thing?” Jason says, shrinking when Tim looks back at him to arch a brow. He can *feel* the judgment this time. “What about the Joker, huh?” he adds, feeling bad about bringing it up. It’s a taboo subject in the manor, which makes sense considering the clown murdered the guy across from him. “Don’t you ever wish that he’d kill him?”

Thankfully, Tim doesn’t look upset over it. He actually looks thoughtful, and Jason busies himself with another sip of tea to give him the time he needs. It doesn’t take long for Tim to answer, though.

“No.”

“What!” Jason exclaims, covering his mouth after realizing it’s a little too loud. His ears burn when he catches Tim’s amused look. “Um. Why?”

“What will it do?” Tim shrugs, grabbing a cookie. He nibbles on it for a while, gazing at Jason with a look he can’t interpret. “I’m sure he wanted to do it, I don’t doubt that, but what purpose would it serve? If he killed the Joker when I died, it wouldn’t have brought me back.” He bites off a piece, and the snap seems so loud in Tim’s shitty apartment. “Sure, it would have stopped him from hurting more people, but it would also break Bruce.”

Jason scowls down at his tea, bouncing a leg. “If it had been me,” he

mutters. “I’d want him to avenge me.”

“And that’s fine, Jason. You can feel that way.” Another snap. “But I don’t want him to kill my murderer. I’m…” A sigh. “Well, to tell you the truth, the less I think about the Joker, the better, and as long as he’s locked away in the depths of Arkham, far, far away from me, I think I’ll be okay living through my second—no, fourth chance at life.”

“Fourth?” Jason peers at him. “What do you mean by that?”

Tim waves a hand. “Don’t worry about it,” he says, finishing the rest of his cookie. He wipes his hands together, now gazing at him intently. It makes Jason a little nervous, truth be told, but he forces himself to hold Tim’s stare. “And listen, just because *I* feel this way about Bruce and his methods, doesn’t mean you have to stop yourself from feeling angry with him. Bruce accused you of something he didn’t do. He hurt you, and didn’t bother to look for proof. Feel free to let him simmer for a while.”

“You believe me?” Jason says, hopeful.

“You said you didn’t kill him,” Tim replies, leaning back in his seat and taking a sip of tea. “So, you didn’t kill him.” He sets the mug down, smiling at Jason. “Plus, I’ve seen the footage. That bastard slipped.”

“Oh.” Jason can feel a couple of tears leak out, so he hastily wipes them away. “Um. Are you going to give it to Bruce?”

“I will if he takes too long to find it,” Tim says with a snort. “Like I said, let him simmer. It’s the least he deserves for doing this to you. But… I think he’ll get there. Eventually. And it’s up to you to decide if you want to forgive him.”

“Even though I didn’t do it,” Jason whispers, looking away. “I don’t feel bad that he died.”

“He was a terrible person.”

“Yeah.” Jason hesitates, toying with his empty mug. His curiosity about the situation, which has steadily grown since being in the man’s presence, pushes him to speak, the words tumbling out in a rush, “I heard that Ra’s al Ghul died. Do you feel bad about that?”

Jason hears Tim inhale sharply, and he sneaks a peek at the man,

watching as he drums his fingers over the table. His green eyes, sometimes so otherworldly, stare at the far wall, but Jason thinks he's looking beyond it, maybe even beyond Gotham itself. He watches, incredulous, as a look of reverence flickers onto Tim's face, which is quickly followed by something deeper than sadness, until finally, his expression settles on utter blankness.

"It's not the same," Tim says, tone more flat. "I can't compare it to this experience. Sorry."

"It's okay," Jason says hesitantly, curling his hands around the lukewarm cup. He peers inside, watching the dregs swirl around after Jason shifts it across the table. "Um, Tim?"

"Yes?"

"Is it okay if I stay the night? I don't want to go home right now."

"Sure," Tim says with a shrug. "But don't you have school tomorrow?"

Jason hangs his head. "Honestly, I don't feel like going," he admits, feeling ashamed. He normally *loves* going to school, even if he feels crummy or has a broken bone, but the thought of being in such a public place, where Bruce or Damian can publicly force him home, makes him want to throw up.

"Wow," Tim says, arching a brow. "Things must be dire. I don't think you've skipped school once in all the time I've known you, Jason."

"Shut up," Jason grumbles, crossing his arms.

"Hey, I get it. How about I call your school and make up an excuse? I could probably even fake a doctor's note so you don't get into any trouble when you go back."

"That seems—"

"Illegal? Probably."

"I was going to say cowardly," Jason tells him, grinning. "But, yeah. It's probably illegal."

"It's not cowardly!" Tim gathers their cups and takes them over to the sink. "Besides, I used to do it all the time!" He turns, clears his throat, rolls his shoulders back, and says, in *Bruce's* voice, "Please excuse my ward, Timothy Drake, from school. He currently has the stomach flu,

and I cannot rightfully send him off to plague other students. Thank you for understanding!"

"Wow," Jason marvels, eyes wide. "You're really good at that."

"Thanks," Tim says in *Damian's* voice now, smirking at him. "I try."

"Okay, now, *that's* even freakier," Jason says, grinning. "How'd you do that? Can you teach me?"

"Sure!" Tim comes around the table, stopping by Jason. He seems to hesitate for a moment, and Jason isn't sure why. Then, he reaches out and… ruffles Jason's hair! Jason can't help but feel excited about the action, only because it's almost like Tim really is his big brother. "Don't be afraid to ask me for help, alright? I'm more than happy to pass on any lesson." Tim looks thoughtful. "Whether I remember it or not, I mean."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Jason asks with a frown.

Tim taps the side of his head with two fingers. "My memory isn't as good as it used to be," he explains. "It's a gamble on whether I remember something from my Blackbird years or not. I'm doing my best to improve it, though! And when it comes to old training, usually going through the motions helps my body remember what to do."

"Like… muscle memory!"

"Exactly."

"Is it because—" Jason stops, nervous. The topic is normally taboo at Wayne Manor, especially in the Batcave, but if Tim is willingly offering up some information… "Um, because of the Joker, right?"

Tim stares at him for what feels like a very long time. Jason even starts fidgeting, but he finds that he can't tear his gaze away from the man.

"Yes," he says eventually, walking over to one of the windows with his hands behind his back. His posture changes, and he seems to stand taller. Oddly enough, it reminds Jason of Damian. "He used his own twisted version of electroshock therapy, tortured and hurt me for… I don't even remember how long, but he kept going until I broke." Tim huffs a laugh. "And God, did I break…" He clears his throat and turns back around. Even though Jason is not as great as Cass at reading body language, he can see the tension in his jaw, the way his body

twitches—maybe in memory of what happened.

“And when Ra’s al Ghul resurrected me,” Tim continues, losing some of that tension in his body. His shoulders slump, but he seems more relaxed talking about *this* than the Joker. “I had no memory of myself or my past life, making it easy for him to swoop in and mold me into something new.”

“Oh,” Jason says, wincing because it sounds a little dumb. “I’m… sorry?”

Tim smiles at him, looking more like his usual self, which is when he’s around Dickie. “It’s alright,” he says, voice gentle. “Things are better now. I have all my friends again, and my memory continues to improve. Why, just the other day, I remembered a dumb joke I told my mom once when we were secretly drinking a soda, and how she laughed so hard, some of it came out of her nose.”

“That sounds really nice.”

“Yeah.” Tim returns to Jason’s side, only this time, he places a hand on Jason’s shoulder, expression shifting to something more serious. “What I’m trying to say is that I’ll do all I can to make sure you know how to keep yourself safe.” He lowers his voice, and Jason has to lean closer to hear him. “I don’t want what happened to me to happen to you, too.”

“Okay,” Jason quietly says, feeling something like anxiety crawl down his spine. He’s never had to deal with the Joker directly—Bruce *and* Damian always sent him home if they encountered anything involving him in the field. After hearing the minuscule details about Tim’s time with the clown, Jason thinks he feels a smidgeon of fear. If he could do that to Tim, who’s to say he wouldn’t do something similar (or worse) to Jason? “Thanks, Tim.”

“You’re welcome, Jason,” Tim says warmly.

“A-And I don’t know if anyone’s said it, but I’m really glad you came back,” he adds, feeling somewhat shy. “Um, and I’m really glad we met, too. You’re cool, and I can see why Dickie loves you so much. You…” Jason fiddles with the drawstring on his borrowed sweatpants. “You’re a great big brother.”

“That’s nice of you to say,” Tim replies, and again, he ruffles Jason’s hair. “I know most of my time gets taken up by Dickie, but I want you to know that I’ll do my best to be there for you whenever you need

help, no matter how big or small the problems are. You—" His eyes crinkle at the corners. It reminds Jason so much of Bruce and his quiet affection. "You're a good kid, Jay."

Jason can feel himself perk up. "Jay?"

"Sorry." Tim holds up both hands. "I heard Dickie call you that when he was talking about you, and thought I'd give it a try. I hope that's okay."

"That's fine! Yeah!" Jason curls his hands into fists, only because the excitement is making his fingers tremble. "And, um, thank you again, Tim—for letting me stay, I mean."

"Of course, Jay," Tim says. He frowns a moment later. "If Damian calls, do I have your permission to tell him that I found you? If not, I can lie to him."

Jason stares at him. "You'd lie to Damian for me?" he says incredulously.

"What, like it's hard? I lie to Damian *and* Bruce all the time!" Tim offers one of those sharp grins Jason has seen him share with Dick after initiating some prank on Bruce. "But if you let me tell him, I'd keep it simple by informing him that I found you, and that you'll go home when you're ready."

"Okay, sure," Jason says, nodding. "That's… fine, I guess." He huffs. "I wouldn't want to worry Damian *too* much. He can get a little overbearing."

"Tell me about it," Tim mutters, releasing a heavy sigh. "Alright, I think we've gone over enough tonight." He claps his hands together, smiling. "You can take the air mattress, alright?"

"But—" Jason tries to argue, only for Tim to shove a finger against his lips.

"Don't fight me on this, Jay," Tim says, shaking his head. He points out a different door. "There's the bathroom. I should have a spare toothbrush in the medicine cabinet and some mouthwash. And make sure you use some of the lotion around your eyes. It'll help with some of the leftover itchiness you get from your domino mask."

"Oh, cool!" Jason peers at him closely. "I saw you changed up your look to include one. Is that going to be permanent?"

“Not sure yet, but it did its job and kept the rain out of my eyes.” Tim gives him a gentle nudge. “*Bed,* Jay. I’ll call your school in the morning, so feel free to sleep in.”

“Alright! I’m going, I’m going…” Jason slides off his chair, but he doesn’t go yet. He lingers beside Tim, staring at him.

Eventually, Tim gives him a bemused look, cocking his head to the side. Jason doesn’t wait for Tim to open his mouth and say something. He throws his arms around the man to give him a quick hug, feeling something in him settle when Tim slowly returns the embrace.

“Goodnight, Jay,” Tim eventually says, releasing him. Jason tucks his hands into the pockets of the sweatpants, feeling his ears burn. “I’m glad you let me help you.”

“Uh-huh,” Jason replies, rather stupidly in his opinion, and hurries to the bedroom. He shuts the door behind him and walks over to the air mattress, slowly lowering himself onto it and dragging the blanket over himself. Jason shifts until he’s comfortable, the tiredness suddenly hitting him when he curls up.

“Goodnight, Tim,” Jason mumbles, closing his eyes. Sleep comes easily, and thankfully, he has no dreams or nightmares.

★★

Jason hears Tim’s phone ring when he’s about halfway through his lunch.

He cranes his neck to try and peer at the screen, managing to read the name ‘Shit For Brains’ before Tim snatches it off the table and holds it to his ear.

“What do you want, Damian?” Tim asks, somehow managing to sound bored. He even inspects his nails, picking at something on his thumb. “You’re bugging me during my lunch time. If we speak any longer, I fear I may lose my appetite and end up dropping a few pounds.” A pause. Then, Tim grins. “Oh? You’ll make it quick? Fine by me. Ask your question, Damian.”

Tim walks over to his lumpy-looking couch. One of the cushions falls

off when he flops down on it, and Jason sees a suspicious reddish-brown stain on the back of it. "Uh-huh," he says after a while. "Yes, I know. I went looking with you guys. Yes. Yup. I hear you."

Jason tries to eavesdrop, he really does, but Tim abruptly starts speaking in a language Jason can't understand. It takes a moment to recognize it as Arabic. He frowns and looks down at his mac and cheese, trying not to feel too left out since he hasn't had the time to sit down with Damian and learn some of it.

Secretly, he's pleased that Damian and Tim are getting along now. He wonders if this means Tim will visit the manor more often. Jason hopes so, only because he thinks it becomes much more lively whenever he's around. It's mostly due to Dickie's excitement, but Tim's a strong contributor to it.

"I'll ask if he wants to talk later," Tim says, and the change to English makes Jason glance at him, only to see Tim already looking his way. He startles, embarrassed at being caught, and Tim merely smiles, expression amused. "Jason's sleeping right now, Damian. I'm not going to wake him up after he had such a horrible day yesterday." Tim rolls his eyes. "No, you can't stop by. I'll drop him off when he's good and ready to go home. Whatever. Bye, stupid."

He tosses his phone aside and gives Jason a dour look. "Your brother can be really annoying sometimes," Tim comments, standing and stretching his arms above his head. Jason winces when he hears something crack—he's not a fan of those sounds. Even with all the crime-fighting he does, hearing bones break still gives him the heebie-jeebies. "Is your food okay?"

"It's great!" Jason tells him, nodding quickly. "I'm a little surprised by the quality… microwavable mac and cheese is usually either hit or miss, depending on the brand."

"That's good to hear," Tim says, shaking out his hands. He walks into the kitchen, and Jason can hear him rummaging around the cupboard. "It's homemade. Courtesy from Ma Kent herself! Just don't tell Alfred about it. I know it's been a while, but last I remember, he was in a secret competition with her regarding their food."

"Oh, it's evolved," Jason gleefully tells him. Gossiping with his big brother! He never thought he'd see the day. "Now, they fight over who bakes the best pie! And you know what's even better? Bruce and Mr. Kent—uh, Clark Kent, I mean—are caught in the middle of it!

Every time Mr. Kent comes over, he always brings one of her pies. He says it's a gift, but when he leaves, I always hear Alfred muttering about how it's a microaggression *and* a threat against his skills."

"That definitely sounds familiar," Tim says, reappearing with a bowl of his own. He takes a seat beside Jason, stirring his mac and cheese. "I'm glad some things have stayed the same. Do you still end up eating her pie?"

"Yeah," Jason says, shoving a forkful of noodles into his mouth. "Only 'cause Alfie says we gotta be polite." He quickly chews and swallows his bite when a thought hits, wanting to get the question out in case he forgets due to the delicious mac and cheese, "So, are you and Damian good now?"

"Sometimes," Tim says, only piercing a couple of pieces with his fork. Jason frowns at him, causing Tim to roll his eyes. He does grab a few more, though, so Jason counts it as a success. "Why do you ask?"

"Last I remember, Damian was skulking about the house and wouldn't talk to anyone," Jason tells him, grabbing his water bottle and taking a large gulp. He realizes he's thirstier than he originally thought, and ends up downing half. "We," he gasps afterward, wiping his mouth. "all knew it was 'cause of you, but we didn't know what happened."

Tim smiles at him, although it looks more like the indulging one Alfred sometimes gets when Jason says something particularly funny. "Just grown-up stuff, Jay," he says. "Don't worry too much about it, okay?"

"Ugh!" Jason frowns. "That's what everyone says when they don't want to tell me things. I'm not a kid! I can handle it, I promise!"

"I'm sure you can," Tim tells him. He holds up his fork, cocking his head to the side. "But it's between Damian and me, and we want to keep it private, alright?"

Jason sighs. "Okay, I guess," he grumbles, stirring his mac and cheese around. "Being an adult sounds rough. I hope I don't grow up to be as weird as you guys."

"You'd be lucky if you did," Tim says, sounding amused. "I can't speak for Damian since I do agree that he's pretty weird, but I'd say I'm pretty normal for my age group."

"Oh, yes," Jason says, rolling his eyes. "Because it's *soooo* normal to

fly around Gotham, stabbing undead creatures of a secret organization."

"Hey, it's better than blowing stuff up like the rest of our Rogues!"

"Okay," Jason concedes. "You *do* have a point there." He scrapes about half of his remaining noodles into his mouth, licking some cheese off his lips. "How many Talons do you still gotta hunt down?"

"Don't know."

"How about the Court members?"

"Only a few left."

"And what are you gonna do when it's all over and done with?" Jason dares to ask, sneaking a peek at him. Tim seems focused on his food, but Jason can see his shoulders tense. "I mean, I know you help us sometimes, but it feels like you only want to focus on the whole Court problem… Will you still be a vigilante?"

"I haven't given it much thought," Tim eventually answers and Jason sees him finish his portion. Jason stares down at the rest of his before sliding it closer to Tim, who smiles, shakes his head, and pushes it back. "I'm only really hunting them down because they targeted Dickie, but after the threat is gone…" He shrugs. "Well, I don't think I can give it up just yet. I have to teach you all I know, remember?"

"Right!" Jason says, unable to keep the grin off his face. He polishes off the rest of his mac and cheese, leaning back and patting his stomach. "That was delicious! Thanks for feeding me, Tim."

"You don't have to thank me for that, Jay." Tim gives him a piercing look. "Now, I know I'm not one to talk, considering my history with Damian, but are you going to want to go home tonight? You can't keep running away from Bruce forever… And I don't think you want to miss any more days of school."

"No," Jason admits, bumping his heel off the leg of the chair. "Is there a way I can get home *without* bumping into him?"

"Oh, yes. Plenty." Tim releases one of those huffy laughs. "I can show you the best ways to sneak in and out of the manor, too. Consider it your first lesson!"

"Will it get me in trouble?" Jason asks warily. However, he can't deny

that he's a little excited by the prospect of learning something new from an older brother.

"Only if you get caught," Tim answers with a shrug. He slides off the seat and holds out a hand. "Ready to go, Jay?"

"I guess," Jason says with a sigh, but he still dutifully reaches out to take Tim's hand. He squeaks in surprise when Tim yanks him off the chair, leading him toward the door at a surprising speed. "Wait, not that ready! Slow down!"

★★

Bruce doesn't bring it up.

Jason fully expects him to say *something* about what went down with Garzonas, but he gets nothing.

Not at home or in the Cave, and surprisingly, not even during patrol. Jason thinks he might be waiting for a better time, especially since they're so immersed in a case that turns his stomach, but he doesn't think it'll come up.

It makes him twitchy, makes him want to lash out at the man until he gets *something* out of him. He channels that energy into taking down terrible people, following instinct rather than waiting for Bruce to give the order.

Admittedly, Jason is fueled by the desire to see every creep off the street, haunted by how he found Gloria in the aftermath. Throwing himself at these scum to beat them black and blue helps with the worst of his guilt, but it still doesn't make up for the fact that they failed her—they're the reason she's dead.

Three weeks of fighting those disgusting men, of putting up with Bruce's searching looks, and his scathing silences, and it all culminates in a fight Jason mostly handles himself, again, following his gut over Bruce's rule. He uses his pent-up aggression from the passing days to knock them down, ready to be finished with it all.

"Well," Jason says, looking down at those men. "That takes care of those creeps!"

“What was *that* all about? Didn’t I tell you to *wait*?”

“Yeah, I heard you,” Jason says, waving a hand. “But we already have everything on these lowlifes! I saw no reason to wait, Batman! And there were only *eight* of them.” He gestures all around him. “Clearly, I was fine!”

Bruce sighs, grabbing him by the shoulders. “Don’t you understand?” he says, and Jason can hear the frustration in his voice. “There are procedures even *we* have to follow. I promised to let Gordon in on the bust, and you jumped the gun!” Bruce frowns, and Jason can see the disappointment on his face, even with the cowl on, when he says, “What’s worse, you nearly got yourself killed doing it.”

Jason yanks himself out of his hold, good mood already ruined. “Near misses don’t count,” he snaps. “I’m fine, aren’t I? Still here and everything.”

“What do you think we’re doing here, Dove?! Playing some game?”

A scoff slips out before Jason can stop it, right before he fully turns away. “Of course,” he says, keeping his voice level. It’s so easy to get mad at Bruce, and it’s starting to get a lot harder to keep his emotions at bay. “All life’s a game.”

He goes outside, pausing beside the Batmobile. It feels like forever ago that he was trying to remove all the tires from the very same car. All he wanted was money to survive the next few nights, and instead, he ended up stumbling into a better one with good food, a warm bed, and a way to fight back against those who hurt people just to hurt them, who take advantage of the weak for their sick, selfish desires.

(People who did the same to Jason’s mother.)

“Whatever,” Jason mutters as he sees the flashing red and blue lights of the approaching cop cars. He storms away from the car and pulls out his grapnel launcher, firing it at the tallest building closest to him. Jason lets it pull himself up, releasing the rope once he gets high enough to fly through the air.

Normally, such a thing brings him joy—a freedom incomparable to anything else in the world. Tonight, however, it fills him with nausea, and the echoes of Bruce’s disappointment follow him all the way home.

★★

(That night, Jason dreams of his mother.

She looks healthier than the last time Jason saw her. Jason feels so much smaller when she wraps her arms around him, and she releases a laugh when Jason buries his face in her shoulder. It's the type he always loved to hear—the kind that would make her whole body shake. Pressed this close, Jason can feel it like a soft rumble, or a cat's purr.

"I love you," Catherine Todd whispers, cupping the back of his head. Her forehead kiss is gentle, reminding him of all the times she tucked him in bed after a story, and when Jason pulls back, he sees her gentle smile. "You will always be my baby."

Jason wakes up afterward in tears. He doesn't go back to sleep for a long, long time.)

★★

"I think I've made a terrible mistake, Alfred."

Jason stops before he reaches the front door, glancing at the sitting room nearby. He fully intended to escape the house before breakfast, but now he's pressing himself against the wall to listen in, hearing Bruce sigh. Jason wishes he could peer inside without giving himself away, wondering what has Bruce so out of sorts.

"The kid's losing it," Bruce says next, voice solemn. "He dove into those thugs like someone looking to die."

Alfred hums before he quietly says, "I've been noticing some disquieting things about Master Jason myself."

Oh, Jason thinks, feeling his stomach sink with dread. *They're talking about me.*

He can feel his hands tremble at his sides. Jason quickly curls them into fists, feeling his mouth go dry. He also feels an initial surge of anger, but Jason quickly shoves it down, inching closer to hear more.

“Oh?” Bruce says in that clinically curious tone of his—like Jason is some fucking case he needs to solve rather than his own son.

“He avoids talking about his parents now,” Alfred says. “I’ve found him looking at that battered photo of his parents, looking particularly distressed, and sometimes, in tears. When he sees me, he hides it and refuses to talk.”

Jason wants to go in and deny it, wants to grab Bruce by the shoulders and insist it’s *not* true. Except, when Jason thinks back on it, there is some truth to Alfred’s words. Indeed, Jason *has* been upset about his parents, wishing—

“It’s my fault,” Bruce says, releasing another one of those sighs. “Jason hasn’t had the chance to come to terms with his parents’ deaths, and all I’ve been doing is putting him out on the field with me. Not much time for a break, really.”

“Being your partner is not exactly the best situation for a teenager adjusting to such a loss.”

Silence follows.

Again, Jason has the urge to peek inside. He wants to read their expressions and body language to get a better idea of what they’re feeling (or hiding). A clock chimes somewhere in the house, normally so loud and daunting, but all Jason can hear is the sound of his fast beating heart.

“I have to rectify the situation,” Bruce eventually says, voice firm—the way it sounds whenever he gives orders as Batman during patrol. “Jason’s going off-duty immediately.”

What.

Jason moves without thinking, his white-hot anger making a return when he steps inside and spits out, “And I don’t have a thing to say about it, huh?”

Bruce looks startled at the sight of him, which fills Jason with immense satisfaction. The World’s Greatest Detective couldn’t even sense his ‘son’ nearby. Ha! What a joke. “Jason,” he says, all soft like he cares. “How long have you been standing there?”

“Long enough!” Jason scowls. “You can’t be serious about this!”

“I most definitely am. You’re in no shape emotionally to be out on the streets.”

“I can’t believe this!”

“I haven’t made this decision capriciously,” Bruce tells him with a serious expression. “A person has to have his head screwed on right for this line of work.” He reaches out to grab Jason’s shoulders. Normally, it’s an action that brings him comfort, feeling like Bruce is meeting him at the same level, but right now, it just makes him feel sick. “You’re hurting, Jaylad. You’ve got a lot of anger and pain inside of you, and it’s going to take time for you to get rid of it.”

Jason says nothing. He remains tense, and the feeling of discomfort increases when Bruce squeezes his shoulders.

“Let me help you,” Bruce says, stupidly earnest. “We can start by talking about your parents.”

God, Jason can’t stand it any longer.

“You want to talk?” Jason retorts, shoving Bruce off him and turning away. He can feel himself trembling, and he wants to be as far away from here as possible. “Talk to Alfred!”

He storms out, accidentally slamming the door loud enough to make him wince. Jason doesn’t let that deter him, though, and he keeps going. There’s no true destination in his mind because anywhere else will be better than a place that’s starting to feel less and less like home.

★★

The city seems so quiet.

Jason walks with his hands tucked into his jacket pockets, no real destination in mind. He passes through semi-empty streets and semi-populated alleyways, hopping over stray cats and glancing over the people curled up in boxes. When he sees a couple of them smoking, Jason considers bumming a cigarette off them to calm the worst of his nerves—but no, he shouldn’t, especially when he doesn’t know if they mixed it with something else.

Besides, Jason thinks as he kicks a dented can toward a pile of black trash bags, wrinkling his nose when he smells spoiled food. He quickly quells the reaction, remembering a time when he would have gladly taken it just to have something in his stomach. *I promised Bruce I'd stop while I worked with him as Dove.*

Except…

(*"Jason's going off-duty immediately."*)

He's no longer Dove.

A surge of anger nearly overwhelms him, but it fades as quickly as it appeared. Jason is left with a somberness that causes a pit to linger in his stomach. He bites the inside of his cheek when his eyes begin to burn, using the brief pain to stave off his tears. Jason goes back to trying not to think about the whole situation, which means it's all he thinks about as he continues his walk.

At some point, Jason finds himself turning onto a familiar street, and when he looks up, he's surprised to see himself standing in front of the apartment building he once shared with his parents.

It still looks as imperfect as ever, what with its peeling paint and old bricks, and looking at it fills Jason with memories of his mother and father.

Most of them are good, yes, but Jason also thinks about the moments spent cowering beneath a table or in his closet whenever his dad got all worked up about something, or the times when Jason held his mother's cold hand, waiting for her to wake up from her drug-induced sleep, and wondering if it'll be the last time he sees her.

Still, there was love.

In the beginning, and especially after his dad left, but even in those in-between moments, when his dad would take him out to the park to play catch, with Jason all bruised beneath his clothes, or when his mom would sing him to sleep, hands clammy as she held him tightly, there was love.

He knows both of his parents only wanted the best for him, remembers them saying as much when he first started going to school, too. His mother would always send him off with a packed lunch, reminding him to stay focused in school, while his father would sit beside him to help him with his worksheets, guiding Jason through

the problems so he could reach the answers himself.

But Gotham can sometimes be cruel to its people.

The day his father lost his job is still so vivid in his mind—the cursing, the rage, and how he had to hop from job to job afterward to make ends meet. His parents would fight over their expenses constantly afterward, but they'd always put on a brave face for him whenever he sat at the table for meals. He quickly learned to stop complaining about the shabbier clothes and smaller school lunches, learned to abscond to his room and hide in the closet the moment his parents started fighting.

Jason stayed out of it as well as he could, but it escalated, and he soon found himself in the crossfire after stepping in front of his mother to take a hit for her. The look in the man's eyes terrified him, and it's all he could think about when the scumbag he called a father kept going.

His mother had curled around him afterward, trembling lips pressing against his forehead when she tucked him into bed that night.

It wasn't a constant thing, but Jason still taught himself how to recognize when his dad was in one of *those* moods. He did his best to speak around the anger, made sure to complete all of his chores and homework before the man came home, and even helped his mom with anything extra so she wouldn't get hurt either.

Then, one day, his father walked out the front door and never came back home.

His mom despaired over the loss, and while Jason did mourn with her, the rest of him hoped that he died in some nowhere alley, taking his rotten soul out of the world for good. He never told her about his feelings or the guilt that would flood in after the thought. Then, she spiraled into her addiction, and Jason had to focus on taking care of her instead.

He had to drop out of school so he could keep coming up with ways to get enough money to put food on the table and pay rent. There were times when he resented the necessity of it all, but he never let it show; he was too busy helping his mother through her highs or withdrawals.

Jason watched her fade away, but he still knew that she loved him to the very end.

And yes, Jason loved her just as much—he still does, of course, he

does, but there's a small part of him that does hate her for leaving him alone in the world. He grew up too fast while she lost herself to drugs, and he quickly found himself out on the streets after she passed, with no support system, no guarantee that he'll live another day.

He hates his father, too, and that's something he can say without hesitation. But even though that bastard hurt his mother, hurt *him,* and left them to rot, Jason can't deny that he still misses and loves him.

Both of his parents failed Jason. And yet, he still loves them, still wishes they were around. He wonders, then, if they'd be proud of him —if they'd believe he was doing good in the world by swinging around the city in a cape.

(Jason wonders, with no small amount of trepidation, if there will come a day when Bruce fails Jason as his parents did.)

"Hey, you!! You're Jason Todd, aren't you?"

"Huh?" Jason turns to see a gray-haired woman leaning out of a window. She looks oddly familiar. "Oh. Yes."

"Then come up here! I've got something to show you!" she says before disappearing inside.

Jason looks around, wondering if it's a trick. A voice inside his head, that sounds a lot like Bruce, cautions him, reminding him to be wary of unknown individuals, no matter the situation. However, Jason's gut doesn't give off any alarms, so he climbs the steps and heads inside.

"Hello?" he calls out after poking his head through a partially open door.

"Come in! Come in!" She bustles into view, carrying a large box in her arms.

Now that Jason's standing closer to her, he can see why she looks so familiar. "You were a friend of my mother's," he realizes, carefully shutting the door behind him. Jason moves closer to her, smiling now. "Mrs… Walker, wasn't it?"

"That's right," she says with a smile. "How you been?"

Jason shrugs. "Getting by," he answers honestly.

“You kinda disappeared after your mother died…”

“Juvenile authorities were looking to put me in a state home,” Jason explains with a grimace. “Didn’t want to go.”

“Can’t blame you for that,” she replies with a look of understanding. Mrs. Walker sets the box down on the table, wiping the back of her hand across her forehead. “Well, when no one claimed your family’s possessions, the landlord sold them off.” She slides it closer to Jason. “I was able to save this stuff for you in case you ever came back. Afraid it’s a little water-damaged. Darn leaky roofs!” She sighs, shaking her head. “The owner’s too cheap to fix ‘em.”

Jason offers a nod, opening the box and peering inside. He can see quite a few things stacked together, but more importantly, “Photographs!” he exclaims, eyes widening. There’s one in a frame that shows his smiling parents holding him, and wow, he looks so small in his mother’s arms. Beneath it, however, there are— “Personal papers!”

He glances at the woman, unable to keep the wide grin off his face. “This is—!” Jason is genuinely at a loss for words, and it’s a struggle to keep his tears at bay. “How can I ever thank you?”

Mrs. Walker waves a hand. “Ain’t nothing,” she says before gently guiding him to the door. “Unfortunately, I have to shoo you out of here. Got some shopping I need to do!”

“Of course,” Jason says, dipping his head in gratitude. He hops down the steps, giving her one more glance. “Thank you, again!”

“Of course! Now, you take care of yourself, son!” Mrs. Walker says, waving him off with a kind smile.

“Thanks!” Jason says, adjusting his hold on the box. He waits until she slips back into the house and shuts the door before walking down the sidewalk. Jason definitely shouldn’t stay here, but he also doesn’t want to go home yet, not when he’s *benched* for no good reason! Ugh, just thinking about it is making Jason mad. Maybe he should go to one of the safer parks on the other side of the city?

“You know, I had a bet with myself. Turns out, I *would* find you out here after you ran off again.”

Jason startles. Embarrassingly enough, a squeak leaves his lips, and he feels his face warm when he hears soft laughter. He scowls at the

scruffy man with slicked-back hair leaning against the wall of the closest building, holding his box tighter.

“You got a problem?” he says hotly.

“Definitely,” the man replies. When he leans closer, Jason realizes he seems oddly familiar. “Your brother is worried about you.” And he slides his sunglasses down his nose, revealing teal eyes that could only belong to one person. “And he wants me to take you to his semi-finished Nest.”

“Tim!” Jason exclaims. Embarrassingly enough, his voice cracks at the end. He tells himself it’s due to his shock, feeling his face burn while he clears his throat. “What the hell? I didn’t even recognize you!”

“That’s the whole point, Jay,” Tim says, pushing his sunglasses back up. He beckons Jason closer, and Jason drifts toward him, still weirded out by his appearance. *Knowing* it’s Tim and seeing someone different is messing with his brain. “I meant what I said, so come on.”

“Are you really calling it your Nest?” Jason wonders, following after the man. “Also, how’d you figure out I’d come here? *I* didn’t even know where I was going to go when I left the manor…”

“Sometimes,” Tim starts. “I go on long walks when I’m upset. Instinct usually takes me to my old home, or the apartment I shared with my dad after his coma, and I never really noticed until I got there.” He shrugs. “Figured you’d do the same.”

“Huh.” Jason stares at him. “That’s some good detective work, Tim.”

“I try my best,” Tim says dryly.

“What’s the point of your disguise, by the way?” Jason has to ask, perching the box on his hip when they stop at a crosswalk. Tim presses the button, and Jason watches for cars, knowing most people don’t give a fuck even when the light changes. “It’s a little weird, if I’m being honest.”

“It’s always good to keep any identity a secret. Consider that your *second* lesson.”

“Well,” Jason carefully says, looking him over. “It’s not like anyone will recognize you…” Finally, the light changes, and Jason rushes onto the crosswalk with his brother, narrowly avoiding a car turning the corner. “Since you’re technically dead, I mean.”

“There’s always a chance,” Tim solemnly replies. “I’d rather not risk it.” He turns to walk backwards, grinning at Jason now. It’s so unlike him, but Jason figures it’s part of the whole disguise thing. “You should look up this alias, kid. He could pass one of Batman’s background checks without flagging anything in his system.”

“Huh?” Jason blinks at him. “How’s that possible?”

“I’ve had it since I was a teenager,” Tim says with a note of pride in his voice. “Actually, you want to know something funny?”

“Always,” Jason replies.

Tim doesn’t continue speaking for some time, although that might be due to him linking their arms together as he guides them through a sudden bustle of people. Jason keeps a tight hold on his box, not wanting some asshole to take the chance to snatch it out of his hands on the mere chance that it might contain something valuable.

Eventually, once they move past the traffic, Tim says, “A long, long time ago, when I so badly wanted to be more… upfront with my teammates—my *friends.* B didn’t want me to, despite all I had given up to live in *his* world on *his* terms.” He puts his hands behind his head and starts walking backwards, sporting a tiny smile. “He let me reveal my face, but not my *real* name, and at that time, I had already been using this alias to meet with Steph.”

“So, your friends knew you by this alias before your real name?” Jason asks, rolling his eyes when Tim nods. “I take it back, Tim. You’re so weird.”

“Thank you!” Tim chirps. “Also, who’s Tim? My name is Alvin Draper. I don’t know any Tims.”

“That sounds so made up!”

Tim laughs. “Kon said the same thing,” he says.

They walk past a couple of run-down buildings before Tim stops them in front of what looks like an abandoned theater. The streets around them are surprisingly empty, and the alleyway closest to them is void of any trash or people. Jason feels the wind shift and shivers.

“This is the place where Bruce lost his parents,” Tim quietly tells him.

Jason looks at him, startled, before a flicker of red catches his

attention. He drops his gaze to see a bunch of tulips in a glass vase, tucked against a pillar. They look fresh. “Oh,” he says.

Tim steps closer to the building, placing his hands on his hips. Jason thinks he spies a strand of green hair on the back of Tim’s head, but then, Tim turns back toward him, and he dismisses the thought. “People rarely come here,” he explains. “Some people say it’s haunted. Others whisper that it’s bad luck. Personally, I saw it as an opportunity to hide in plain sight.”

“It looks…” Jason tries to find something nice to say, but it’s hard when he’s looking at wooden boards covering the spots where windows used to be, every inch covered in graffiti. “Well, it definitely exists, that’s for sure.”

“I promise you, the inside looks different,” Tim says. Jason watches as he walks over to a small opening behind one of the boards and cautiously follows the man after he waves Jason over.

The lobby looks old, dusty, and torn apart, which is honestly what he expected for an abandoned place in Crime Alley. Tim leads him past all the mess to a blank wall on the far side of the theater. He places his hand on it, and Jason is shocked to see a door slide open, revealing a high-tech elevator.

Jason doesn’t wait for Tim to say something. He hops inside, keeping a tight hold on his box when he feels the elevator move. Eventually, it stops, and when the door opens, Jason finds himself in a well-furnished, yet totally boring living room.

“Like I said, it’s semi-finished,” Tim says, tossing his sunglasses onto a nearby stool. He also peels the scruff off his face (Jason didn’t even realize it was a prosthetic) and musses up his hair until it returns to its usual state. “I’m working on having another floor for my vigilante work, but ideally, this is where my friends and I will live.” A pause. “And probably Dickie when he wants to escape the manor.”

“Cool,” Jason offers, carrying his box over to the table. He starts to feel nervous, and he can’t stop his fingers from trembling as he reaches out to open it. The first thing he sees causes him to still. Jason stares at it for what feels like a long time before finally mustering up the courage to reach in and pull it out, using his other hand to wipe the dust off the front.

It’s a framed photograph of himself and his parents—the kind people get at those shopping malls. He looks to be about three or four, and

he's sitting in his mother's lap with a bright smile. She has her arms wrapped around him, expression serene. One of her hands is grabbing his, and Jason can see a bit of a blur where her thumb sits on his knuckles, as if she were rubbing them when the photo was taken. His father stands behind them, a look of pride on his face.

(Jason clasps his hands together, sweeping a thumb over his knuckles, and remembers all the times his mother did the same, particularly during moments when he felt too nervous to move.)

"It's been a long time since I've seen my parents look like this," Jason quietly says, picking up the frame and tipping the photograph toward Tim. His nose itches when hair gets in his face, and he turns his face away to try to fight the sneeze. "Honestly, I think it's… weird. The last time they were together, they weren't happy at all."

"I understand," Tim says in a gentle tone, leaning back with a smile. "You were a cute kid, Jay."

Jason huffs, setting the frame aside. "Shut up," he grumbles, the tips of his ears growing warm. He digs through the papers, pulling out some of his parents' personal papers. Strangely enough, there's a deed for an acre of land in Virginia, which he sets aside for later review.

"Hey, my old report cards!" Jason crows, flipping through them. He feels a surge of pride when he sees his perfect grades, as well as the comments his teachers left about his positive attitude and how he loves to learn. It's something that always got him an extra scoop of ice cream when he'd go out to celebrate with his parents, way before things went so wrong between them. Jason sets them down, picking out another slip of paper. "And my birth certificate! How…"

Jason stops when he sees something *odd.*

"Jason?" Tim asks, and Jason hears a hint of worry in his voice. "You okay, Jay? What's wrong?"

"I—uh—" Jason can hear the shakiness in his own voice. He can't seem to force himself to look away from what's in front of him, eyes fixed on the smudged name of his mother. It starts with an *S* instead of a *C,* which means— "Catherine Todd wasn't my real mother."

"What? Jason, what do you mean?"

Dizzy, Jason passes his birth certificate over and stumbles over to the couch. He collapses on top of it, the plastic wrap crinkling beneath

him, and holds his face in his hands. It feels as though his entire world has shattered. His stomach turns. There's no way his mom—Catherine—didn't know, and he can't even ask them why they hid it from them… because they're both dead.

Tim is saying something, but Jason can't hear anything beyond the ringing in his ears. He turns over to stare up at Tim's ceiling, thinking of his mother—well, step-mother, he guesses, and remembers her in life. She loved him, he knows, but even that can't quite ease the sting of betrayal he's currently feeling.

And to think, after everything, his birth mother might still be out there.

"Wait!" Jason suddenly exclaims, hopping off the couch and moving past Tim to rummage through the box again. He pulls out other photos and papers, dumping them onto the table until he finds— "My father's address book!"

"Jason," someone says, grabbing his arm. *"Jay."*

Jason whirls around to see Tim standing there, looking concerned. "What?" he says, annoyed about being disturbed. When Tim says nothing more, Jason looks down and flips through the pages, trying to find all the women that begin with the letter 'S.' "They have to be in here somewhere," he mutters, mostly to himself, as he starts pacing.

"Who, Jay?"

"Whoever's my mother, Tim!" He shakes the book in Tim's general direction, a crazed energy nearly overwhelming him. "Her name has to be in here! Only—" Jason frowns, shoulders slumping. "These addresses are probably out of date, huh?" he says glumly, brushing his thumb over his father's pen markings. "Even if I did find her, I doubt she's living at the same place…"

"Probably not," Tim says, gazing at him with an expression that reminds him too much of Bruce—piercing and intense, like he's looking *through* Jason rather than at him. "The Batcomputer could help you get the information you need."

"Yeah," Jason says with a sigh. "But then I might see Bruce."

"He'll be busy for a while." Tim waves a hand, now looking rather flippant. "What with the Joker escaping and all."

“The—” Jason stares at him, eyes widening. Again, he feels that anxiety, that trickle of dread he can’t quite shake off. “When did that happen?!”

“I’m trying not to think about it too much.”

“Oh, right.” Jason slowly sits in one of the chairs, feeling guilty. “Sorry.”

“No, it’s fine,” Tim tells him, shrugging. “Fair warning, though—if you hear me laughing a lot, I promise I’m fine and not dosed with any Joker Venom. It’s just a… lingering reaction, I guess. If it seems like it’s not going to stop any time soon, or if I run out of air, *please* call Superboy and no one else.”

“Got it,” Jason says, because how else can he respond? But now that he’s looking at him, Jason can see the corners of Tim’s mouth lifting, almost as if he’s struggling to contain a laugh. “Um, are we going to the Batcave?”

“Yes,” Tim answers, placing a hand on his shoulder. The touch soothes him more than he thought possible. Jason even feels tears spring to his eyes, and he hastily wipes them away. “But if we see Damian, know that I *will* sacrifice you to get away from his nagging. It’s way too early to deal with him.”

Jason glances at the clock on the far wall. It’s almost one. “Okay,” he says slowly, laughing when Tim tugs him out of the chair and herds him to the door. “Alright, Tim! I’m going! Jeez, you don’t have to be so pushy…”

“I’m a big brother,” Tim deadpans. “It’s what we do.”

★★

“Ugh,” Tim says after they exit Tim’s old bedroom, frowning. “Damian’s here.”

“Huh?” Jason glances around, seeing nothing amiss. He even forces himself to still, straining to listen to… well, anything. “How do you know?”

“I can smell his tea.” Tim sighs. “Isn’t he supposed to be at work? I know he’s helping Bruce with stuff at Wayne Enterprises…” He then meets Jason’s gaze, gesturing down the hall. “Alright,” he says. “You go down and search up those names. I’ll distract him until he fucks off somewhere—I have to leave a present for Dickie, anyway. That can be my excuse for why I’m here.”

“Thank you,” Jason says gravely. “I’ll always remember your sacrifice.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Tim says, and *shoves* him, like a real brother would! How cool! “*Go,* Jay. I’ll catch up.”

And so, Jason goes, not wanting to waste anymore time when the possibility of finding his birth mother is on the line.

★★

“How’s it going?”

Jason looks up to see Tim standing at the foot of the stairs, holding two mugs in his hand. “Is that coffee?” he asks hopefully, sighing when Tim shakes his head, looking amused. “Man, I feel like I’ve been down here *forever,* but I think I finally found the three women who could potentially be my birth mother.”

“But…?” Tim says, setting the mug down in front of Jason when he stops beside him.

“They’re all out of the country,” Jason says with a sigh, picking up the mug and taking a deep sniff. Hot chocolate! And it’s Alfie’s recipe, which is even better. “In the Middle East and Africa, of all places…”

“Hm.” Tim leans over him, his expression shifting to something more serious. Jason sneaks a peek at his mug and sees that he’s drinking the same thing. Does that mean Alfred knows they’re down here? “What do you have so far?”

“Sharman Rosen,” Jason immediately answers, pointing to the woman’s picture. She has black hair and dark eyes, and she’s smiling off to the side—at what, Jason doesn’t know. “She emigrated to Israel and currently works for the Israeli Secret Service.” He brings up the

next profile, a woman with short hair and brown eyes. “Sandra Woosan, a lady suspected of being a mercenary who’s currently operating out of Lebanon at the moment. And lastly…” Jason expands the profile of a blonde-haired, blue-eyed woman. “Dr. Sheila Haywood, working on famine relief efforts in Ethiopia.”

“Interesting.” Tim takes an audible sip of his hot chocolate. Jason does the same, resisting the urge to shut his eyes and let the warmth of Alfred’s delicious drink envelop him. “You did good work, Jason.”

Jason can *feel* himself puff up at the praise. Oh, the irony of being a bird… of sorts. “Thanks,” he says, looking at the screen again. “Um… What do I do now?”

“Well, what do *you* want to do, Jason?” Tim asks curiously, leaning against the desk. He gives Jason a searching look.

“I don’t know,” Jason admits, peeking at him hopefully. “Got any ideas?”

Tim chuckles, tipping his head back. He taps a nail against his mug, which somehow sounds so loud in the Cave—probably because Jason’s holding his breath, keeping himself absolutely still as he awaits Tim’s response.

“Well,” he eventually says. “You could look into them further to try and find out where they crossed paths with your dad. It might take a long time, but it’ll give you a better idea of where to start.” A pause. “Actually, I could narrow down the choices by contacting Shiva Woosan.”

“Huh?” Jason blinks at him. “How do you know her?”

“She trained me when I was younger,” Tim replies, the corner of his mouth twitching. “Taught me a lot about the best ways to use a bo-staff. We parted on semi-decent terms, so she might be willing to answer my question on whether she had a child or not.”

“Only if you want,” Jason says, staring at Tim with wide eyes. “That’s really cool, though.”

Tim dips his head in acknowledgement. Then, he reaches out to poke Jason’s forehead. “You could go down the line and make your own investigation, or pick one of them, and we’ll fly out to where they are so we can talk to them directly.” He arches a brow, reminding Jason of Alfred, oddly enough. “Your choice.”

“You’d go with me?” Jason says, voice coming out small.

“Of course!” Tim smiles at him, leaning over and ruffling his hair. “No matter what happens, you’ve got me in your corner, Jay.”

Jason ducks his head afterward, feeling his eyes burn. He clenches his hands in his lap, overwhelmed by his feeling of gratitude.

Sure, Jason could have gone on to do this investigation himself, but knowing that Tim will accompany him on his journey makes the worst of his anxiety unravel. He’s too used to having support from his family, although he knows most of it stems from the need to keep him safe after they lost Tim.

“I feel like I should be dealing with this myself,” Jason admits, rubbing the back of his neck. “I mean, it’s *my* job, but…” He smiles at Tim, feeling a little shy. “It’s nice to know that you have my back.”

“Always, Jason.”

“Should I—” Jason stops to mull it over. If he tells Bruce about his problem, the man will certainly stop him from going out there to find his mother. He might even scold Jason, telling him that he’s not in the right shape to run off on this type of investigation.

Bruce probably wouldn’t even care about finding my real mother, Jason thinks, only a touch bitter. *He probably couldn’t even understand why I’d want to locate her.*

“I’ll leave a note,” he eventually says. “So Bruce doesn’t worry.”

“Smart,” Tim says.

“But how am I going to get to this location?” Jason wonders next, pointing at the screen. He glances at Tim, curious, and asks, “Have you ever been?”

“No, but I’ll make sure you don’t get lost or kidnapped.” Tim puts his hands on his hips, frowning. “I’ll have to procure some fake identities for us to use at the airport in the meantime, but it shouldn’t take too long to make them. I think I remember how to do it.” He then gives Jason a look. “Fair warning,” he says. “There’s an extremely high chance that Damian will follow us out there.”

“What?” Jason cries, scowling. “Why?!”

“Because he’s an overprotective stalker.”

“Coming from the guy who has trackers on all of us…”

“Hey, that’s for your safety! And also, I’m speaking from experience. Damian chased *me* around the world to try and bring me home.”

“Huh,” Jason says after a while, peering at the man curiously. “You don’t sound as mad as you used to whenever you talked to Damian… and you willingly went off to have tea with him! Are you sure you’re actually Tim? Do I need to tell Dickie that you’ve been replaced by a clone?”

Tim rolls his eyes. “Remember what I told you, Jay?” he says, and Jason huffs when the man ruffles his hair. “It’s grown-up stuff.” He then wraps an arm across Jason’s shoulder, tugging him against his side. “Now, go upstairs and pack for our journey.”

“Alright,” Jason replies, trying to wiggle free from Tim’s grasp. Tim only holds on tighter, which makes Jason retract his earlier feeling. Big brothers aren’t cool! They’re annoying! “What do I even bring? I mean, do I have to give my mom something? A present? What do you even get for your mom after reuniting with her years later?”

“We can think of something along the way,” Tim says, and huffs a laugh. “I guess this means we’re doing a physical investigation, right?” He gestures to the blank screen. “Did you figure out where you want to go first?”

“Well, you’re going to call that Shiva lady, right?” Jason asks, and when Tim nods, he continues, “I figure we can check up on the next woman on the list, and if it doesn’t pan out, then we circle back to the first.” Jason starts walking to the stairs, stops, and turns back to remove the profiles from the Batcomputer. “But first, we pack.”

“Yup,” Tim says, setting his mug down on the desk. “And then—”

“—Ethiopia, here we come!” Jason says with a grin.

End Notes

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